the
PERSONALIZATION
OF POLITICS IN
THE EUROPEAN
UNION

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The Personalization of Politics in the European Union
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Acknowledgements

The idea for this book was triggered by the introduction of the so-called *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure for the 2014 European Parliament election. By encouraging European party families to select pan-European lead candidates for the election campaigns, its proponents sought to increase the interest in and awareness of the elections among European citizens. I was intrigued whether this institutional innovation would serve as an indicator of the personalization of politics in the European Union, whereby politicians increasingly become the main focus of political developments. I initially focused on the crucial role of the media in providing the link between European representatives and their represented, as well as the consequences for democracy in the European Union. But I soon decided that a broader approach was necessary to understand the patterns, causes, and effects of personalized politics in the European Union, which led me to devise this book project. I would like to thank Dominic Byatt at Oxford University Press for his dedicated support and advice since its inception.

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PART I

FACING EUROPE
1

Why Study the Personalization of Politics in the European Union?

A few days after the British voted to leave the European Union (EU) on 23 June 2016, the European Parliament held a debate in Brussels. During that debate Jean-Claude Juncker, who was the President of the European Commission at the time, directly addressed British Eurosceptic Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), who had protested when he said that he would regret the referendum outcome because he was ‘not a robot’:

You are ‘bureau-exits’. I am not a bureaucrat, I am not a technocrat. The Commission was elected by this assembly, we had a democratic process with the lead candidates, which led to the result that you do not like, but we are there as human beings. I am not a robot, I am not a machine, I am a human being, I am a European, and therefore I have the right to say that I regret the vote of the British people.¹

With these remarks, he raised two noteworthy issues. With the first one—‘I am not a bureaucrat’—he appears to respond to Eurosceptics and populists who often and prominently claim that politicians in Brussels would be unelected and undemocratic elites (see Rooduijn 2018: 356); an allegation which had also been promoted during the Brexit referendum campaign (Khabaz 2018). Beyond Eurosceptics, however, the feeling that the EU would be rather removed from its citizens is also shared by Europeans more generally. According to Eurobarometer surveys conducted between 2017 and 2019, an average of 51 to 54% of European citizens stated that the word ‘remote’ would describe the EU very or fairly well. While these figures vary across European countries, with, for example, a higher number of Dutch (62%) than Polish respondents (43%) sharing these views in the Eurobarometer of autumn 2019, they have remained relatively stable over time.

Føllesdal and Hix (2006: 536) have long argued that the EU would be too distant from European voters. According to them, one reason for this problem would be that the design of the EU political system differs from national political systems

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so that voters find it difficult to understand the complex policymaking process at the EU level. Journalists face similar challenges when informing their audiences about EU affairs (Gattermann 2011). Information, however, is crucial for citizens and voters to identify responsible actors in EU policymaking and hold them accountable for their decisions (Hobolt and Tilley 2014). Another reason for the perceived remoteness of the EU lies in the institutional structure, which hardly provides a link between the outcomes of European elections and the composition of the executive (Føllesdal and Hix 2006; Hix 2008; Hobolt and Tilley 2014). Unlike in national politics across European countries, there is no stable parliamentary majority to which the EU executive is accountable, which would provide ‘government clarity’ (Hobolt and Tilley 2014: 145). This becomes especially problematic in times of crisis to which the EU has perpetually been exposed in recent years, ranging from the recurring financial crisis, to the so-called refugee crisis, to Brexit and more recently to the Covid-19 pandemic. If European citizens neither have sufficient information nor opportunities to hold EU politicians accountable in challenging times, there is a risk that trust in the EU decreases (see Hobolt and Tilley 2014).

To address the institutional problem, the European Parliament promoted the introduction of the so-called Spitzenkandidaten procedure, which is the German word for lead candidates. This is the second issue that Jean-Claude Juncker referred to when arguing that there had been a democratic process of electing the President of the European Commission. The procedure was indeed first employed in the 2014 European elections and had been stimulated by the Lisbon Treaty, which came into force in December 2009 and stipulated that ‘[t]aking into account the elections to the European Parliament […], the European Council […] shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission. This candidate shall be elected by the European Parliament by a majority of its component members. […]’ (Art 17(7) TEU). The European Parliament interpreted it in such way that it would present the Council with the lead candidate from the European party group which received the most votes in the preceding elections. In a resolution from 22 November 2012, it urged ‘the European political parties to nominate candidates for the Presidency of the Commission’ and expected ‘those candidates to play a leading role in the parliamentary electoral campaign’.

Five European party families had appointed six lead candidates altogether (the European Green Party was led by a duo), who campaigned across Europe and participated in several pan-European televised debates. After the elections, the European Parliament also called upon the Council to select Jean-Claude Juncker of the European People’s Party (EPP), which had received the largest share of the votes across Europe, as Commission President (Pop 2014). Following the

² Resolution on the elections to the European Parliament in 2014, 22 November 2012 (2012/2829 (RSP)).
intervention of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the Council eventually gave in and nominated Juncker (Westlake 2016: 52), although many heads of state or government had been rather reserved about the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure during the campaigns, not least because it gave the European Parliament more power vis-à-vis the Council (Hobolt 2014). Juncker was subsequently elected by the European Parliament. These events explain why Juncker insisted during the Brexit debate in the European Parliament that he had been elected following a democratic procedure.

These developments had also led the European Parliament to claim ‘that in 2014 the “Spitzenkandidaten” process proved to be a success’ and it was ‘ready to reject any candidate in the investiture procedure of the President of the Commission who was not appointed as a “Spitzenkandidat” in the run-up to the European elections’ held in 2019.³ This time, however, the Council did not nominate the EPP’s *Spitzenkandidat* Manfred Weber after the elections, but proposed their own candidate, Ursula von der Leyen, who was eventually elected by the European Parliament. The procedure was thus abandoned, which untimely cast doubt on the accomplishment of the European Parliament’s aim to ‘[reinforce] the political legitimacy of both Parliament and the Commission by connecting their respective elections more directly to the choice of the voters’⁴ with the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure.

While the EU’s institutional problem has not been fixed, first studies indicate that the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure has not been able to tackle issues related to information and awareness either: political parties hardly campaigned with the *Spitzenkandidaten* (Braun and Popa 2018; Braun and Schwarzbözl 2019), media attention differed greatly across lead candidates and EU member states (Gattermann 2020; Schulze 2016), and ultimately, the personalized campaigns had rather limited effects on electoral behaviour (Gattermann and Marquart 2020; Schmitt et al. 2015). This suggests that the European Parliament’s intention to ‘personalise the distant Brussels bureaucracy, and thereby increase interest and participation in European democracy’ (Hobolt 2019: 19) with the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure has not been successful.

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³ Decision on the revision of the Framework Agreement on relations between the European Parliament and the European Commission, 7 February 2018 (2017/2233(ACI)).

⁴ Resolution on the elections to the European Parliament in 2014, 22 November 2012 (2012/2829 (RSP)).
of politics both over time and across domestic political contexts within the EU. Personalization is defined ‘as an increase over time in the centrality and autonomy of individual politicians at the expense of collective institutions (parties, cabinets and parliaments)’ (Langer and Sagarzazu 2018: 472). It is important to stress that personalization is a longitudinal process, which does not necessarily evolve linearly over time but can include periods of rising or decreasing levels of personalization. Conversely, personalized politics ‘describes a specific point in time, a situation where political individuals are more important relative to political groups’ (Pedersen and Rahat 2021: 213; emphasis in original). This distinction is important for the study of personalization and personalized politics in the EU. One the hand, we require comprehensive understanding of the patterns and drivers of personalization in EU politics as a longitudinal process. On the other hand, we also want to explain differences in the degree to which EU politics are personalized across Europe, as well as to analyse the consequences of personalized EU politics, particularly for European citizens.

To do so, I consider four key dimensions of personalization, namely institutional personalization, media personalization, personalization of politician behaviour, and personalization in citizen attitudes and behaviour (Balmas et al. 2014; Kaase 1994; Karvonen 2010; McAllister 2007; Rahat and Sheafer 2007). First, institutions are important because the formal personalization of rules and procedures allows for the identification of responsibilities within the political decision-making process. Ideally, institutional personalization enables media and ultimately citizens to hold responsible decision-makers to account (provided they are given the opportunity to do so). That is why, second, it is pertinent to examine the extent to which the media personalize their news from Brussels and Strasbourg. After all, they fulfil a crucial linkage function between EU citizens and their representatives. Thus, a potentially limited degree of media personalization would lead to citizens being inadequately informed about individual responsibilities at the EU level. Third, there is a danger at the political level that ‘without the personalization of political debate and decisions, political accountability remains invisible and unattributable’ in the EU (Meyer 1999: 633). Thus, if personalization does not occur in the behaviour of politicians, the media will likely have a hard time informing citizens about what their representatives do on their behalf (see also Adam and Maier 2010: 239). Conversely, if politicians engage more often in personalized behaviour and the media do not pick up on this, then they would fail to provide a link between representatives and those they represent. Fourth, personalization—as intended by the Spitzenkandidaten procedure—could ultimately make EU politics more accessible to its citizens. While some warn that a focus on persons and personalities in political news would come at the expense of policy issues and substantive political information (see Adam and Maier 2010: 220; Langer 2007: 372), in the EU personalization could potentially
lead to a ‘humanization’ of the abstract and complex political system in the eyes of European citizens.

To study the personalization of politics in the EU, this book relies on an extensive longitudinal and cross-country comparative research design and applies multiple methods, combining various types of novel observational data with existing survey data and original experimental evidence. This approach allows testing the comprehensive argument put forward in this book, which concerns three key actors in EU politics, namely journalists, politicians, and citizens. While the book does not explain variation in institutional personalization, I argue that institutional change towards more personalization at the European level is an important precondition for media personalization as it provides journalists with opportunities to more often personalize their news from Brussels and Strasbourg. However, while these institutional opportunities are important, they are not sufficient for the personalization of politics to develop in the EU.

To explain personalization among media, politics, and citizens in the EU, I rely on the mediatization thesis, which asserts that media, politics, and society are increasingly influenced by media logic in modern democracies (Hjarvard 2008: 113; Strömbäck 2008: 238). Media logic is characterized by an accentuation of certain news values, including personalization. Personalization can be further distinguished by individualization and privatization (Van Aelst et al. 2012). Individualization entails that the focus shifts onto individual politicians at the expense of collective actors in political processes and represents the major concept underlying personalization throughout the book. Privatization means that personal characteristics and experiences become more important than professional attributes of politicians. It plays a subordinate role in this book as we first require an understanding of individualization patterns before we shed light onto this additional dimension; only the very last chapter engages with this concept. Privatization is also associated with the concern that substantive issues become less important, while this is generally not considered a matter of contention in relation to individualization.

Media logic underlies journalistic motivations to report on individual politicians. Because of the complex EU political system and lengthy decision-making processes, journalists, who primarily cater for domestic audiences, are incentivized to make EU news understandable and interesting to their audiences. Giving the EU a face (or several) enables them to do so. While reporting on individual responsibilities in EU politics provides European citizens with important information, the demand for such information may be conditional on the extent to which EU affairs are politicized in the domestic political context. Likewise, domestic institutions, particularly media and electoral systems, either enhance or hinder personalization of EU politics.

As mediatization also affects politics, which in this process is often understood through the concept of professionalization, it is reasonable to expect that media
logic is also responsible for longitudinal changes in politician behaviour, while domestic media systems moderate the degree of personalized behaviour. In particular, MEPs seek to signal responsiveness to their voters. I argue that their chances to gain media attention increase if they gradually engage in more personalized behaviour, both in terms of legislative and communicative activities. Although these incentives are conditional on the mode by which they are elected—either in candidate-centred or party-centred electoral systems, the personalization in their behaviour as a longitudinal process is likely to be more pronounced for MEPs who enter the European Parliament through party lists, as they tend to be more removed from their voters compared to MEPs who are elected by a personal vote.

Taken together, if the media in their adoption of media logic were to take note of personalization in the behaviour of politicians, this would likely have consequences for both citizen attitudes towards the EU and for political awareness. I argue that individual politicians may not yet serve as information shortcuts for European citizens and voters to make sense of EU politics. Instead, personalization could make EU politics more accessible because citizens would learn that humans, rather than (perceived) abstract and complex institutions, represent their interests on their behalf. This should therefore have positive effects on trust in the EU and particularly on the extent to which citizens believe that the EU is responsive to their concerns. Moreover, this humanization may also generate interest in the substantive content of personalized news so that citizens become more aware of the information. While this book does not directly study voter behaviour in European elections, it aims to contribute to the wider understanding of personalization effects in EU politics. Specifically, I argue that if personalization of EU politics makes voters more receptive to political information, they are likely to embrace the adoption of media logic in EU affairs and prefer personalized news over non-personalized news during European Parliament election campaigns. This would have important implications for voter behaviour, which I discuss in the final chapter of this book.

Plan of the Book

Chapter 2 elaborates on the argument presented above. Before doing so, it provides an extensive review of the interdisciplinary literature concerning the personalization of politics. This review demonstrates that the phenomenon is prominently studied in national politics. However, the scope, causes, and consequences of personalization in EU politics have thus far received little scholarly attention, which underlines the significance of this book's contribution to the extant literature. In the second part of the chapter, I therefore present an integrated theoretical framework concerning the dynamics between institutional personalization, media
personalization, personalization in the behaviour of politicians, and personalization in citizen attitudes in the EU.

The subsequent parts of the book deal with the perspectives of journalists, politicians, and citizens. In the second part, I examine media personalization of EU politics. Chapter 3 focuses on the relationship between institutional personalization and media personalization at the supranational level. To isolate this relationship from domestic political institutions and contexts, the chapter applies automated content analysis to the EU news coverage by the pan-European quality newspaper Financial Times between 1982 and 2019. It distinguishes two types of media personalization within the wider concept of individualization to compare the media visibility of politicians with that of institutions, namely centralized personalization, that is an increase in focus on the President, and decentralized personalization, which refers to the dispersion of personalization away from political leaders. The chapter finds that there is a moderate increase in both centralized and decentralized personalization in the news coverage involving the European Commission. However, these trends appear to be driven by the different Presidents and their leadership styles rather than formal treaty changes. Institutional changes nevertheless led to an increased focus on the Presidents of the Eurogroup and the European Council right after the respective offices had been created, but centralized personalization decreases thereafter. Lastly, centralized personalization is also detected with respect to the news coverage of the European Central Bank and the European Parliament. These findings are discussed against the backdrop of the media’s responsibilities to hold European politicians publicly accountable, before the chapter offers a small case study into the news prominence of the Spitzenkandidaten in 2014 and 2019.

Chapter 4 investigates the extent to which media personalization is conditional upon domestic political and institutional contexts. To do so, it analyses media personalization with respect to news coverage involving the European Commission and the Parliament in national newspapers from seven European countries, including Ireland, the UK, France, the Netherlands, Denmark, Poland, and Italy, between 1992 and 2019 (1999 to 2019 in the case of the European Parliament). Media personalization is operationalized as individualization, that is, an increasing focus on individual politicians at the expense of either institution, and presidentialization in terms of an increasing focus on the Commission President vis-à-vis the Commission. Contrary to the expectations, the chapter cannot confirm any universal trend towards greater media personalization in the news coverage of either institution. While some factors influence degrees of media personalization in the short term, domestic media systems—rather than electoral systems and politicization of EU affairs in domestic contexts—appear to be responsible for cross-country differences in the extent to which national newspapers personalize their news from Brussels and Strasbourg. The findings also indicate that in four out of seven cases journalists more often personalize
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The third part of the book deals with the behaviour of European politicians. Chapter 5 analyses the extent to which the legislative behaviour of MEPs has become more personalized between 1999 and 2019, a time period which covers the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth legislative terms of the European Parliament. Specifically, it examines three indicators of personalization in the legislative behaviour by an analysis of written parliamentary questions, which can be tabled by individual MEPs. First, it shows that the relative number of individual questions versus questions put forward by several MEPs is high throughout all terms, but decreases slightly during the eighth Parliament. This development is related to new rules of procedure, which capped the number of questions per MEP in the eighth term, underlining that institutional de-personalization has halted further personalization in MEPs' legislative behaviour. Second, the findings nonetheless suggest that more MEPs tend to ask more questions over time. Third, an individual-level analysis of all MEPs having served full or incomplete terms in the European Parliament shows that personalized behaviour is conditional upon domestic media contexts and electoral systems. MEP legislative behaviour is positively associated with the extent to which the domestic media coverage is characterized as being personalized by experts from the European Media Systems Survey 2010 (Popescu et al. 2010), albeit not during the eighth term. Moreover, MEPs become more active over time regardless of how they were elected, but contrary to initial expectations, MEPs elected in candidate-centred electoral systems put forward even more questions than MEPs from party-centred systems in the two most recent parliamentary terms. After a brief discussion of the implications of the findings for party representation in EU politics, the chapter concludes that personalized legislative behaviour provides positive conditions for media coverage of European representatives.

The extent to which media indeed pick up on legislative activities is part of the study objective in Chapter 6. Specifically, the chapter is interested in the extent to which the legislative and communicative behaviour of MEPs become increasingly intertwined, and whether this has any consequences for their visibility in traditional and on social media. The chapter begins by providing an overview of Twitter adoption among all MEPs that served in the sixth, seventh, and eighth parliamentary terms, which demonstrates that, by the eighth term, Twitter has become a standard tool of communication for MEPs regardless of where and how they are elected. Next, the chapter analyses the interplay of Twitter activity and legislative behaviour of Dutch MEPs during the two most recent parliamentary terms, showing that their legislative and communicative behaviour has become more intertwined in the eighth Parliament compared to before. While traditional
media appear to be more important drivers of personalized behaviour than social media, MEPs have also become more effective in influencing the agenda of traditional and social media with their legislative activities over time. The chapter ends with the question whether these developments would make a difference for European citizens.

The fourth and last part of the book therefore deals with the consequences of personalized EU politics, particularly for European citizens and voters. Chapter 7 investigates the effects of personalized EU news on attitudes and political awareness. Conceptually, the chapter studies effects of individualized news, that is news that stresses individuals at the expense of EU institutions. To do so, it conducts two analyses. The first one is an aggregate-level study of the relationship between personalized news coverage and trust in of the European Commission and the European Parliament, respectively, between 1999 and 2019. It relies on the media data from Chapter 4 and Eurobarometer data for seven European countries. It finds that media personalization with respect to the European Commission does not make a difference for political trust, but there is an association between media individualization in the press coverage of the European Parliament and citizen trust in this institution. The second study represents a cross-country comparative survey experiment that tests the effects of individualized news versus non-personalized news from the European Parliament on external political efficacy, that is, the belief that EU politics is responsive to citizen concerns, and information recognition. The study was pre-registered and conducted with respondents from online panels in Ireland, the Netherlands, and Italy in July 2018. It finds no direct effects, but there are some moderating effects of political interest in EU affairs and of self-perceived competences to take part in politics on external political efficacy, which additionally vary in terms of direction and scope across country. Only the findings from the Dutch sample lend some partial support to initial assumptions concerning positive effects on external political efficacy among those with low levels of political interest in EU affairs and low levels of internal political efficacy, respectively. Overall, however, the results provide only very limited support to the initial argument that personalization could make EU politics more accessible.

To provide a different test of the personalization thesis, Chapter 8 examines the extent to which voters prefer personalized news over non-personalized news during European Parliament election campaigns. This chapter considers both individualized and privatized news content to take comprehensive account of media logic and relies on a pre-registered conjoint experiment that was conducted with German voters in May 2019. It finds that respondents have a distaste for privatized news and most often prefer news that involves institutions. These preferences align with the findings from Chapter 4, which has shown that national newspapers tend to more often report on EU institutions than on individual politicians. Individualized news is equally preferred to news that focuses on political parties.
This finding is remarkable given the key role of political parties in providing cues for European voters and against the backdrop of the party-centred electoral system to elect German MEPs. The chapter also contends that the potential for individual politicians to serve as information shortcuts in EU politics is likely to increase once additional heuristics are provided. Overall, respondents appear to prefer high-quality over low-quality information and news that involves the polity or policies compared to politics, which underlines that attention to individual politicians in their official function must not come at the expense of substantive issues.

Finally, Chapter 9 summarizes the main findings and discusses their implications for the relationship between media and politics on the one hand, and the relationship between media and citizens on the other hand. Against the backdrop of the mixed findings of the book, it also provides a short discussion of why any assertion of a conceivable personalization deficit in EU politics may be unwarranted. This concluding chapter ends with an outlook for the future of personalized EU politics, highlighting that a possible renaissance of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure would require that media and politics engage with the procedure far ahead of the next European Parliament elections, so that voters have sufficient time and opportunity to formulate opinions about the candidates.
2
An Integrated Theory of Personalization in European Union Politics

To what extent, under what conditions, and with what effect does the personalization of politics in the European Union (EU) occur? This chapter presents the theoretical framework to answer this question. Before doing so, I first provide an extensive review of the relevant dimensions of personalization and how the existing literature has researched the phenomenon around the globe. This review also demonstrates that the personalization of politics, with few exceptions, has been comprehensively studied in national politics, but has received rather little attention in EU politics. In the second part of this chapter, I therefore present an integrated theory concerning the dynamics between institutional personalization, media personalization, personalization in the behaviour of politicians, and personalization in citizen attitudes and behaviour in the EU. I conclude with a short discussion of the implications before I provide an outlook on how the following chapters test the theoretical stipulations presented below.

The Personalization of Politics as an Interdisciplinary Research Phenomenon

The personalization of politics represents one of the key research enquiries in electoral studies, party politics, political communication, and journalism (e.g., Adam and Maier 2010; Bittner 2011; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Garzia 2014; Karvonen 2010; Kriesi 2012; Langer 2007; Lobo and Curtice 2014; McAllister 2007; Poguntke and Webb 2005; Rahat and Sheafer 2007; Renwick and Pilet 2016; Wattenberg 1991). Personalization is understood as a longitudinal development by which the focus shifts onto individual politicians at the expense of collective actors, such as political parties and institutions (Karvonen: 4; Langer and Sagarzazu 2018: 472; Rahat and Sheafer 2007: 65). It is important to stress that personalization is a long-term process and that it has often been subject to descriptive empirical assessments. However, one can evaluate the extent to which politics are indeed personalized at a specific point in time or in a certain context (see Pedersen and Rahat 2021: 213), particularly if one would like to understand the consequences of personalized politics. Furthermore, Rahat and Kenig (2018: 117) highlight that reverse trends of personalization are also possible, in which case one would speak...
of depersonalization: ‘this is a situation in which the political weight of the individual actor in the political process declines over time, while the centrality of the political group increases.’

The definition of personalization is rather broad and therewith captures trends in institutions, media coverage, and political behaviour (Balmas et al. 2014; Kaase 1994; Karvonen 2010; McAllister 2007; Rahat and Sheafer 2007). In the following, I discuss the conceptualizations and determinants of four key dimensions of personalization—institutional personalization, media personalization, personalization of politician behaviour, and personalization in citizen attitudes and behaviour—and their relationship with one another, which is visualized in Figure 2.1 below.

Institutional Personalization

Several types of political institutions are pertinent to consider with respect to personalization. Yet, before I discuss relevant institutions, it is important to reiterate the distinction between personalized politics and personalization of politics. If regarded as a process over time, Rahat and Sheafer (2007: 70) argue that institutional personalization ‘is the first link in the chain of personalization(s).’ By adapting Wolfsfeld’s (2004) model that was developed to understand the relationship between politics and the media, the so-called politics-media-politics principle, Rahat and Sheafer (2007) propose that institutional change may affect how media report about politics, which may then trigger behavioural changes among politicians. Empirically, they indeed show that the personalization of candidate selection procedures within Israeli political parties preceded media personalization developments, which in turn were ahead of personalization of legislative behaviour in the Knesset between 1949 and 2003.

However, institutions tend to be rather sticky—either due to path dependence, habits, or actor preferences (e.g., see Hall and Taylor 1996; Pierson 2000; Thelen 1999), that is, once established it is hard, albeit not impossible, for political or societal actors to change or even replace institutions. For example, electoral reforms often require supermajorities by constitution; and those political actors who have thus far benefited from a certain electoral system are unlikely to support such reforms. Sticky institutions also mean that journalists, politicians, and citizens are familiar with the institutional prerequisites and the degree to which these are personalized. This may imply that in some highly personalized institutional contexts, high degrees of media personalization and personalization of political behaviour are a likely finding compared to contexts in which institutions are less personalized.

Thus, I argue that while institutional change may lead to more or less personalization in other dimensions over time, institutions also provide the context
that may determine the degree to which media coverage and political behaviour among politicians and citizens are already personalized. In other words, if institutions do not change, but allow for personalized politics, we are also likely to find a high degree of personalized media coverage and subsequent personalized political behaviour that varies little over time; but if institutions change, this can potentially affect processes of personalization in other dimensions over time. Figure 2.1 depicts this twofold role of institutional personalization graphically. Here institutional personalization represents both a potential driver of media personalization, as argued by Rahat and Sheafer (2007), as well as a context with respect to the observed degree of institutional personalization, with which journalists, politicians and citizens are already socialized, for all remaining dimensions of personalization. This interplay of institutional context and institutional change is especially relevant in the multilevel political system of the EU, which I elaborate further below.

What kind of institutions provide favourable conditions for personalized politics and which institutional changes may lead to more or less institutional personalization? With respect to institutional context, the regime type—either presidential of parliamentary—determines the degree to which politics are personalized by the constitution. Regimes have not changed substantially for European countries while being members of the EU. In presidential systems, there is a high degree of individual responsibility and authority, while political parties play a more important role in parliamentary systems (Dalton et al. 2000; McAllister 2007: 576–7; Poguntke and Webb 2005). Likewise, single-party governments tend to provide more authority to a single leader, such as the Prime Minister (O’Malley 2007), compared to coalition governments, where leaders of several parties tend to shape policymaking, either as party leaders, ministers, or parliamentary leaders.
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(e.g., see Strøm et al. 2010). This also applies to party systems: the more parties operate in multiparty systems, the more individual leaders are visible in the political decision-making process, whereas two-party systems are associated with large parties whose internal membership and ideological preferences are rather diverse and thus the focus tends to lie on few individual leaders. Likewise, electoral systems, which are inherently related to party and political systems, tend to provide favourable conditions either for parties or for individual politicians. The underlying assumption is that the more personalized the electoral system, the higher the incentives of legislators or new candidates to cultivate a personal vote, that is, to develop and uphold close contacts with their voters (Carey and Shugart 1995). Similarly, political parties’ procedures to select election candidates can enhance the personal vote or not (e.g., Crisp et al. 2004; but see Shomer 2009). Crucial dimensions of selection procedures comprise potential restrictions for the candidacy, the voting systems to appoint candidates, the extent to which party selectorates are inclusive or exclusive, and the degree of decentralization in the selection procedures (Rahat and Hazan 2001). This seminal framework has also been applied to selection procedures concerning Spitzenkandidaten within European party families by Put et al. (2016). Selection procedures vary within country, but are also conditional upon the electoral and party system (e.g., Hazan and Voerman 2006). Since political parties and their members are able to change selection procedures, they are more likely to undergo change over time compared to electoral systems, although the latter have experienced several personalized reforms across Europe in the last few decades (Karvonen 2010; Renwick and Pilet 2016).

Lastly, with the rise of comparative political communication research (e.g., Blumler et al. 1992; Esser and Hanitzsch 2012; Esser and Pfetsch 2004), scholarly demands to understand the role that communication contexts—beyond political systems—plays for the relationship between journalists, politicians, and citizens have grown over time. It follows that media systems have become a prominent subject in this field. A media system can be described as ‘a set of media institutions and practices understood as interacting with and shaping one another’ (Hallin 2016). In their seminal work, Hallin and Mancini (2004) classify media systems on four main dimensions, taking a historical perspective: the structure of media markets and particularly the role of the press; the degree of political parallelism between politics and media; the extent of journalistic professionalism; and the degree of state intervention in regulating the media. Accordingly, Hallin and Mancini (2004) propose that three types of media systems are present in Western democracies: the polarized-pluralist media system, the democratic-corporatist media system, and the liberal media system. Hallin and Mancini (2004; 2010) acknowledge that their typology characterizes ideal types; and calls for standardized operationalizations and sharper typologies of components of media systems (Norris 2009: 340) have been addressed by also considering cases beyond Western democracies (Hallin and Mancini 2012), as well as through more detailed
empirical assessments of media systems and political information environments (e.g., Aalberg et al. 2010; Brüggemann et al. 2014). As we will see below, comparative research into media personalization often relies on the traditional classification of media systems by Hallin and Mancini (2004) in their research designs (e.g., Balmas and Sheafer 2014; Boumans et al. 2013; Holtz-Bacha et al. 2014; Vliegenthart et al. 2011).

Media Personalization

Media personalization can be conceptualized in several ways, which has led to calls for more conceptual clarity and consistency in the past (Rahat and Sheafer 2007; Van Aelst et al. 2012). Generally, within the overall concept of personalization Van Aelst and colleagues (2012: 206–8) distinguish between individualization and privatization in media coverage: the former describes a shift from collective to individual actors in politics, whereas the latter is understood as an increasing emphasis on the private politician while politicians’ professional profiles become less important over time. Both personalization trends can be further divided into subcategories. With respect to privatization, Van Aelst and colleagues (2012: 207) propose to distinguish between references to the private life (see also Jebril et al. 2013; Langer 2010) and references to politicians’ personal characteristics (see also Grbeša 2004). However, the main focus of this book lies on the first category, individualization, although we will also briefly examine the role of privatized news in EU politics in the final empirical chapter. Regarding individualization, Van Aelst et al. (2012: 207) propose to differentiate between the ‘general visibility’ of individual politicians in political news content at the expense of political parties and the ‘concentrated visibility’ of political leaders. Concentrated visibility has also been referred to as presidentialization in extant research (e.g., Boumans et al. 2013; Holtz-Bacha et al. 2014; Kaase 1994; Kriesi 2012; Langer 2007; Šimunjak 2017; Vliegenthart et al. 2011). Balmas and colleagues (2014) propose yet another conceptual distinction, which will be relevant for the empirical argument developed in Part II of this book: they differentiate between centralized personalization, whereby journalists are expected to focus on political leaders at the expense of collective actors and which is therefore similar to the concept of presidentialization (see also Langer and Sagarzazu 2018), and decentralized personalization, which implies that news media coverage focuses on individual politicians—bar party leaders—at the expense of political parties. Given the often differing conceptualizations of media personalization, scholars have not agreed on certain benchmarks. Rather, comparisons over time provide insights into more or less media personalization, while cross-country comparisons allow assessments with respect to which political news coverage is more or less personalized. A similar approach will be employed in this book.
What are the main drivers of personalization trends in media coverage? Apart from some important exceptions, little is known about the impact of institutional change on media personalization. In her seminal work, Šimunjak (2017) suggests that regime change from authoritarianism to democracy in the case of Yugoslavia and Croatia is associated with decreasing levels of media personalization due to decentralization of powers and the move away from an authoritarian leader to collective political actors. Furthermore, Langer and Sagarzazu (2018) show in a pioneering study that changes in the UK government from single-party to coalition governments is associated with lower levels of media personalization and vice-versa; and the aforementioned research by Rahat and Sheafer (2007) has detected a relationship between the personalization of candidate selection procedures and media personalization in Israel. Beyond institutional change, empirical evidence suggests that there are differences in the degree to which media coverage is personalized across institutional contexts. Dalton et al. (2000) as well as Kriesi (2012), for example, argue empirically that newspaper coverage of national elections tends to be more personalized in (semi-)presidential systems compared to parliamentary systems, although this difference does not apply to media coverage of foreign affairs (Balmas and Sheafer 2014). The degree of federalism also appears to play a role: levels of personalized media coverage tend to be higher in centralized states compared to federalist political systems (Van Aelst et al. 2017a).

Likewise, additional research shows that newspaper coverage of foreign affairs tends to pay more attention to leaders elected in countries with two-party systems compared to both moderate and polarized multiparty systems (Balmas and Sheafer 2013). Other studies suggest that in addition to the political system, media systems and particularly the degree to which media competition and commercialization are manifest in national newspaper markets would be responsible for higher degrees of personalization in the British press compared to the newspaper coverage in the Netherlands (Boumans et al. 2013; Vliegenthart et al. 2011) and Germany (Holtz-Bacha et al. 2014), which is also supported in a larger study including six countries (Balmas and Sheafer 2014). Media systems are generally relevant when considering longitudinal trends of mediatization—a core trend related to personalization. The mediatization thesis stipulates that media, politics, and society are increasingly influenced by media logic in contemporary democracies (Hjarvard 2008: 113; Strömbäck 2008: 238). Adapting the definition by Altheide and Snow (1979: 10), Strömbäck (2008: 233) refers to media logic as ‘the dominance in societal processes of the news values and the storytelling techniques the media make use of to take advantage of their own medium and its format, and to be competitive in the ongoing struggle to capture people’s attention’. In political news coverage, certain news values have become more prominent under the media logic paradigm. Particularly, media logic is characterized by an emphasis on negative news, political conflict, and entertainment elements, as well as by individual politicians being placed under
the spotlight (e.g., Brants and Van Praag 2006; Mazzoleni 1987; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Strömbäck 2008; Van Aelst et al. 2008). In other words, personalized political news content is considered one key characteristic of media logic. Following media logic, newsmakers regard the public as consumers (Brants and Van Praag 2006). Since newsmakers apply news values as selection criteria for publishing political news based on what they believe that the audience considers interesting (Shoemaker and Reese 1996: 106), the relationship between media and citizens with respect to personalization is expected to be of reciprocal nature rather than unidirectional (Figure 2.1). For example, if media report about individual politicians, this may lead the audience to demand more news about them in the future. This is additionally relevant in the multilevel political system of the EU in which journalists primarily cater for domestic audiences, as I will argue below.

However, there exists little evidence for a universal and linear increase in the adoption of media logic elements over time. Rather, the use of negativity and conflict elements in political news coverage fluctuates over time (e.g., Magin 2015; Reinemann and Wilke 2007; Takens et al. 2013; Wilke and Reinemann 2001; Zeh and Hopmann 2013) and varies across media systems (e.g., Maurer and Pfetsch 2014; Vliegenthart et al. 2011). Likewise, evidence for an alleged increase in personalization in political news linked to mediatization is also mixed across time (e.g., Aizenberg et al. 2015; Boumans et al. 2013; Magin 2015; Reinemann and Wilke 2007; Takens et al. 2013; Zeh and Hopmann 2013). This may not least be due to differing conceptualizations and operationalizations (Langer and Sagarzazu 2018; Van Aelst et al. 2012) and to different research foci, namely routine periods (Boumans et al. 2013; Langer and Sagarzazu 2018; Vliegenthart et al. 2011) or election periods, which are the most common periods under study. With respect to EU politics, we have little knowledge about media personalization. While previous studies have compared the media visibility of EU-level and national actors during European Parliament election campaigns, no distinction was made between politicians, parties, and institutions (e.g., Boomgaarden and De Vreese 2016; Schuck et al. 2011; De Vreese et al. 2006). Likewise, although the Spitzenkandidaten have already received some scholarly attention with respect to political news coverage in traditional media (e.g., Belluati 2016; Schulze 2016), they do not lend themselves to longitudinal assessments given that the procedure has only been introduced in 2014 (but see Gattermann 2020).

It is also important to consider different types of media content in the study of personalization. Among scholars of political communication, a traditional distinction with respect to media personalization is that of unpaid versus paid media (Rahat and Sheafer 2007). The former comprises journalistic news content, such as on television and in newspapers, while the latter refers to advertisements and campaigning. Newspapers represent a prominent source for media personalization research because they allow us to assess trends over a longer period of
time. And although television ‘automatically focuses on persons and personalities’ (Karvonen 2010: 4), Kriesi (2012: 831) found that personalization trends (or absence thereof) detected in newspapers and television news programmes are comparable (see also Van Aelst et al. 2017a). The findings by Takens and colleagues (2013) also suggest that personalization trends are similar between these two types of media in the Netherlands, but that presidentialization trends are more pronounced for television compared to newspapers. Similarly, Banducci et al. (2018), in a study of the 2015 British general election, detected a reciprocal influence between newspapers, radio, and television with respect to visibility of party leaders, although the relations between the different media outlets would be rather complex and conditional upon the individual leader.

Social media, on the other hand, are ‘personalized per definition’ (Kruikemeier 2014: 132). Since politicians and parties are more in control of the social media activity (and pay for it by employing social media managers), these forms of communication have been categorized under the umbrella of paid (or controlled) media (Balmas et al. 2014; Rahat and Kenig 2018; Rahat and Sheafer 2007). At the same time—and particularly from the perspective of political scientists, activity on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms can also be considered as personalization of politician behaviour as far as communication activities are concerned (see also Pedersen and Rahat 2021). Social media merely represent a new form of personal campaigning (e.g., Enli and Skogerbø 2013; Karlsen and Enjolras 2016), which has traditionally been considered to be shaped by electoral incentives of politicians (Carey and Shugart 1995). Hence, I consider politicians’ own communication activities as part of the following dimension, that is, the personalization of politician behaviour.

**Personalization of Politician Behaviour**

This concept of personalization has thus far been studied with respect to communicative behaviour, particularly with a focus on campaigning, and—to a lesser degree—with regards to legislative behaviour. Rahat and Sheafer (2007: 68) define the personalization in the behaviour of politicians as an ‘increase in individual political behavior and a decline in party activity’. Generally, these developments are considered to be initially due to changes in electoral systems that have also increasingly provided more favourable conditions for personalized campaigning (see Renwick and Pilet 2016). Furthermore, the reason why this type of personalization is often treated as a consequence of media personalization is that media logic not only influences media organizations and journalists but also political parties and politicians (Mazzoleni 1987; Strömbäck 2008). That is to say, political actors have become more professionalized in their (campaign) communication (e.g., Negrine 2008; Norris 2000) as part of the wider mediatization trend, by
responding to changes in the media system and the political system (Holtz-Bacha 2002: 23). Historically, the introduction of television has been regarded as a major driver of change in campaign styles, particularly towards personal campaigning (e.g., Farrell and Webb 2000; Krauss and Nyblade 2005; Mughan 2000; Reinemann and Wilke 2007).¹ More recently, websites, blogs, and social media have diversified campaign means and therewith opened up further possibilities for personalized communication (Kruikemeier et al. 2013).

Campaigning has received rather comprehensive scholarly attention with respect to the personalization of politics given its influence on voting behaviour and ultimately election outcomes. Individualized campaigning is not necessarily a contradiction to party campaigns as the latter benefit from candidates campaigning on their platforms (Zittel and Nyhuis 2021). This may be part of the reason why scholars generally observe longitudinal trends towards more personalized campaigning in traditional tools, such as advertisements in newspapers (e.g., Elmelund-Præstekær and Mølgaard-Svensson 2014; Karvonen 2010), election posters (Hayek 2018; Steffan and Venema 2019; Vliegenthart 2012), or constituency campaigns (Zittel 2015; Zittel and Gschwend 2008); also with respect to European Parliament elections (e.g., Bøggild and Pedersen 2018; Gattermann and Vliegenthart 2019; Giebler and Wefels 2013; Giebler and Wüst 2011), although most of these latter studies do not have a longitudinal research design. Newer tools for personalized campaigning comprise websites (Kruikemeier et al. 2013; Pedersen and van Heerde-Hudson 2019; Zittel 2009), Facebook (e.g., Ceccobelli 2018; Enli and Skogerbø 2013; Magin et al. 2017), and Twitter (e.g., Jungherr 2016; Karlsen and Enjolras 2016; Kruikemeier 2014; Otto et al. 2019), among others, and have also been studied in the context of recent European Parliament elections (e.g., Braun and Schwarzbözl 2019; Obholzer and Daniel 2016; Stier et al. 2021; Vergeer et al. 2013). Despite the abundance of new communication technologies, surprisingly few studies have investigated the extent to which representatives communicate with their electorate beyond election day (e.g., Giger et al. 2021; Metz et al. 2020; Raunio and Ruotsalainen 2018), even though social media behaviour is relevant for assessing behavioural personalization among politicians (Pedersen and Rahat 2021: 215).

 Likewise, compared to the literature on campaigning, the personalization of legislative behaviour is a rather new field of research enquiry, even though personalized campaigning and personalized legislative behaviour are intertwined. Concretely, scholars argue that politicians who have entered Parliament on a personal ticket are also likely to engage more often in individual legislative activities, thereby trying to be responsive to their main principal, i.e., voters, and to

¹ Moreover, Yildirim (2020) has shown that weekly televised debates in the Turkish Parliament can lead to more responsive legislative behaviour in the short term, although Soroka et al. (2015) suggest that legislators have not engaged in more personalized behaviour after the introduction of television in the Canadian House of Commons.